

Interrogating The Idea Of Ignorance In Knowledge Society

Dr. R Devanand

Dept. Of English, GFGC Koratagere.

devanandnalina@gmail.com

Abstract

Ignorance as a tool of suppression, a lost realm, a bliss, a defense mechanism, is studied at various level, for several purposes with varied intensity. The role of ignorance in knowledge society can never be dismissed. Perils and privileges of ignorance are not necessarily natural outputs of a given society. Agnotology studies ignorance with philosophical basis. Quintessentially multidimensional concept, ignorance has too many irresolvable complications that cannot be readily sorted out. It has many similarities with studies of absence. Ontology in relation to epistemology is as useful for studying power equation as ignorance. These properties can be used to compare various case studies. The lack of symmetry in explanation and representation are both socio-cultural and methodological challenges to studying ignorance. Inquiry is invasion. Learning is winning. Apparently speaking, Ignorance is conquered or overcome by knowledge and ideas. Deception falls before fact. Argument is war. Rational argument is war against illogicality. Ignorance is not always a cognitive deficit. Specialization is a social consensual ignorance arrangement. This paper attempts to sketch a need for the study of ignorance which is shaped by multidisciplinary studies of knowledge and ignorance.

Keywords: *Agnotology, Ignorance, Knowledge, Knowledge Society, Uncertainty.*

The theory of Knowledge Society explains how knowledge is basic to the polity, economy and culture of the modern society. Agnotology is as important today as it was back when Proctor studied the tobacco industry's obfuscation of facts about cancer and smoking.

Doubts often work in favor of those who create such confusions among the mass. For example, politically motivated doubt was propagated over US President Barack Obama's nationality for many months by the opponents. That doubt had currency until he publicized his birth certificate in 2011. In a paper written by the Brown & Williamson tobacco company, it looks at how to market cigarettes to the mass public: *"Doubt is our product since it is the best means of competing with the body of facts that exists in the mind of the general public. It is also the means of establishing controversy."* Such a revealing section of the paper obviously spells out how to neutralize the entire existing/established facts to work in their favor. Similarly, some political analysts in Australia tried to create panic by equating the country's credit rating to that of Greece. In reality, the rating agencies know that the two economies are quite different and they cannot be readily compared. The public idea that there will always be two divergent views, does not always end in a rational deduction. "We live in a world of radical ignorance, and the marvel is that any kind of truth cuts through the noise," says Proctor. He also warns that even though knowledge is 'accessible', it is not necessarily accessed. Knowledge like the boiling point of mercury or water, distance between moon and earth, depth of Indian Ocean, the height of Himalayas maybe trivial. But for larger questions of political or philosophical domain, the knowledge people possess habitually comes from belief system, conventional thinking or even propaganda that is systematically spread over a period of time.

Proctor found that initially ignorance is spread, when many people do not understand a concept or fact and later when special interest groups – like a business firm or a political group – then labor hard to create confusion about an issue among the mass. In the case of ignorance about tobacco and climate change, a semi-literate or scientifically illiterate society may undoubtedly be more vulnerable to the maneuvers used by those intend to confuse the mass and hide the truth. Ignorance need not always a negative trait of human affairs. In fact, it is a crucial component in social relations, establishments, and even culture. People are encouraged to create and maintain ignorance, often systematically. Knowledge which can be known versus ignorance which must not be known is not just an interesting point but it is academically useful exercise. Dynamics of the unknown is more powerful than the known one. Ambiguity or uncertainty is a sort of internal conflict.

Thank you for smoking, a 2005 American Comedy movie, based on 1994 Satirical novel of the same name by Christopher Buckley, shows the efforts of Big Tobacco's Nick Naylor to successfully sell cigarette in a time when the opposite views from scientific data/research were proving otherwise. He lobbies on behalf of the cigarette company for the huge sale. His condition is almost like selling his own soul to Mephistopheles. Production and distribution companies of that movie would have surely taken a lenient view of tobacco companies for spreading confusion about the ill effects of tobacco. Commercial movies too enormously contribute for the existing confusion. Since visuals attract the audience more than anything else, such movie makers may also ponder over the ethical dimension of the messages that the movie sends to the larger audience. At least in this case the ignorance about the ill/soothing effects of smoking has more perils than advantages for the public.

Generally, all cultures seem to view Ignorance as blocked vision. It is certainly a blindness. In many instances, it can be politically driven and culturally sponsored domain that needs to be analyzed as objectively as possible. On the contrary to know is to see. Vague ideas are indistinct, foggy, dim, unclear and somehow obscured. Knowledge is bright, enlightening and illuminating. Ignorance is dim and murky. Whatever is dark, has to be feared and avoided. Strangely enough, that which has to be avoided has to come under the scanner of academic enquiry. Ideas can be felt. Vague or uncertain ideas are spineless and unfocused. Objective knowledge, truth and logic are hard to find in such cases. Incomplete ideas are clumsy, while finished ideas are sophisticated. Ambiguity and nebulosity are undemanding, dull and lack wide reception. Precision is hard, catchy and sharp. We can smell knowledge, get onto or lose the scent of it. Bad ideas stink that prompts avoidance. Good ideas are at least harmless. Agnotology may have had its origins in the heyday of the tobacco industry; today the need for both a word and the study of human ignorance is as strong as ever. Ignorance has, of late, become an important focus of study in many academic disciplines, including economics, law, political science, philosophy, sociology and others.

Frederick Douglass's *Narrative* shows how white slaveholders perpetuate slavery by keeping their slaves ignorant. At the time Douglass was writing, many people believed that slavery was a natural state of being. They believed that blacks were inherently incapable of participating in civil society and thus they should be kept as workers for whites.

The *Narrative* explains the strategies and procedures by which whites gain and keep power over blacks from their birth onward. Slave owners keep slaves ignorant of basic facts about themselves, such as their birth date or their paternity. This enforced ignorance robs children of their natural sense of individual identity. As slave children grow older, slave owners prevent them from learning how to read and write, as literacy would give them a sense of self-sufficiency and capability. Accounts of how ignorance and uncertainty are fabricated, imposed, and manipulated by agents are not easily accessible. These accounts treat ignorance as at least socially fabricated. In some cases, ignorance is deliberately or intentionally constructed, whereas in other cases, it emerges as a consequence of certain politico-social processes.

Malaria, one of the world's most serious vector-borne diseases, is caused by several species of parasites. The discovery of the Malaria parasite in the late 1880s and the demonstration that the mosquito is the primary vector of malaria were well received. In the 1950s, the use of different insecticides, especially DDT, led to a near eradication of malaria in many temperate zones and tropical areas. In the decades after World War II, knowledge about malaria appeared to be sufficient, and questions of uncertainty about it were rarely communicated in scientific journals or the broader public. Even though by 1951 malaria was considered eliminated from the United States and a few years later also in Europe, in the 1960s the rate of decrease slowed substantially and cases reappeared. In 1969, the hope of global extermination of malaria was finally abandoned. It became quite obvious that in spite of previous successful eradication efforts, crucial unknowns were not taken into consideration. The eradication campaign was abandoned for one of control. After the unexpected resurgence of malaria became known, scientists became aware of their own limits or the lack of knowledge that led to ignorance—that is, knowledge about the limits of former knowledge about malaria control. This surely is a classic case of how our knowledge/ignorance shapes our attitude towards a disease/disorder. Once upon a time, Malaria was deadly, now it is controllable, therefore it impacts both the larger aspects of public policy making and the attitude of people in general towards Malaria. Unethical Pharmaceutical companies exploited the fear factor of the mass and made large amount of money by selling their exorbitantly priced medicines. The hapless patients had no other option but to buy the medicine of the Pharmaceutical companies as they had established monopoly.

In polite conversations, the speakers do not expect to deal in the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Ignorance is used in various guises to justify inaction, maintenance of the status quo, opportunism, evasion of responsibility or culpability, and risk management policies. Ignorance is a vacuum. Knowledge covers a surface or fills a container. An ignoramus is devoid of knowledge, whereas an expert is brimming with knowledge. The unknown is wilderness. Knowing is domesticating and taming the wild. The border between the known and unknown is a wild frontier. Learning and discovery push back the frontier, diminishing the domain of ignorance. The unknown is an ocean. Knowledge is an island. The bigger the island, the larger the border between the known and unknown. The unknown is an abyss, a chasm. Uncertainties are shifting sands. When we know, we are on solid ground, we are grounded. The unknown is a secret. Decoding secrets is not always encouraged. Nature continues to keep secrets in its bosom. The unknown is hidden, locked away. Discovery or learning is unlocking and revealing. Michael Smithson, in his blog on *Metaphors for Ignorance: Ignorance and Uncertainty*, posted on 9 November 2010, opines that Information exchange is sexual intercourse, cross-pollination. Good ideas are fertile and can procreate; they are productive. Bad ideas are sterile or barren, unproductive.

Western intellectual culture is predominantly about banishing or reducing ignorance, and negative associations with ignorance are the default, even though this is manifestly not so in quotidian social life. Common metaphors for ignorance are negative. For example, ignorance is blindness; to know is to see. Knowledge, by nature of its composition and role, is supposed to be power. Ignorance is helplessness and impotence. But political interference can make it more powerful. Uncertainty or doubt still is impotence. We succumb or deteriorate under ignorance. Ignorance is being stuck, enslaved. Presumably, Knowledge makes us free. Ignorance is inequality. At least that's how the vested interests in society use it. Shared knowledge is supposed to hail the virtues of equality, democracy, freedom. Unshared knowledge is selfishness, autocracy, elitism, oppression. Secrecy is self-centred. While Privacy and expertise are superior. Ideas and knowledge are resources. Knowledge and information are currency. Ignorance is poverty, want of something that makes it truly troublesome. Bad ideas are insignificant and insolvent. An expert has a wealth of knowledge. Good ideas are rich; bad ideas are impoverished.

The roles played by knowledge and ignorance are not merely mirrorimages of one another. In fact, the interplay between knowledge and ignorance involves largely unexplored transactions and predicaments. However, the dangers of ignorance can never be ignored, even if one acknowledges the privileges of knowledge. Unfathomable perils of ignorance are any day problematic and if any form of ignorance is culturally sponsored and politically motivated it becomes more problematic.

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